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Why Not a Woman?

Facts about women and work

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September 1976

Why Not a Woman

. . .as a machinist, a carpenter, a welder, a toolmaker, electrician, bus driver, or backhoe operator?

Women are in these occupations right now, and they are performing successfully in a variety of skilled blue-collar jobs. Although in the past such jobs have been held almost exclusively by men, that situation is changing rapidly.

Let's take a look at some of the reasons why.

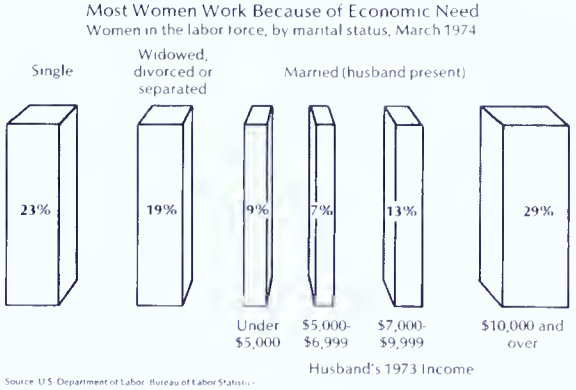
More women work outside the home.

Over the last 25 years the number of women in the labor force more than doubled, and from 1964 to 1974 it increased by nearly 40 percent. Almost half of all women are now in the labor force. This increase is due almost entirely to the fact that so many married women, including young women with small children, now work outside the home.

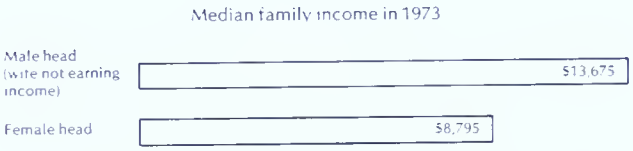
Women work because they need the money.

Nearly three-fourths (71 percent) of women who work outside the home are supporting themselves and their families, or they are married to men who earn less than $10,000 per year.

For millions of families the wife's income makes the difference between poverty and a moderate standard of living.



The number of women who are supporting families is growing at an accelerating rate. Between 1970 and 1973 the number of families headed by a woman increased by a million. This is almost equal to the increase that occurred over the entire decade from 1960 to 1970. Women now head about 13 percent of American households. Many of these female bread-winners cannot earn enough to support their families if they work in low-paying "female" jobs.



In addition, more women are single and must support themselves. Between 1950 and 1975 the proportion of single women aged 20 to 24 increased from 28 percent to 40 percent. The divorce rate doubled in the last decade, and the proportion of divorcees who have not remarried rose from 2.5 percent to 6.8 percent during this same period.

Clearly, most women work for the same reason most men work: They need the income.

Some women work for personal satisfaction.

Women increasingly are expecting job satisfaction from their employment. Fewer and fewer of them hold the traditional attitude that paid employment is just something to fill the interim between school and marriage.

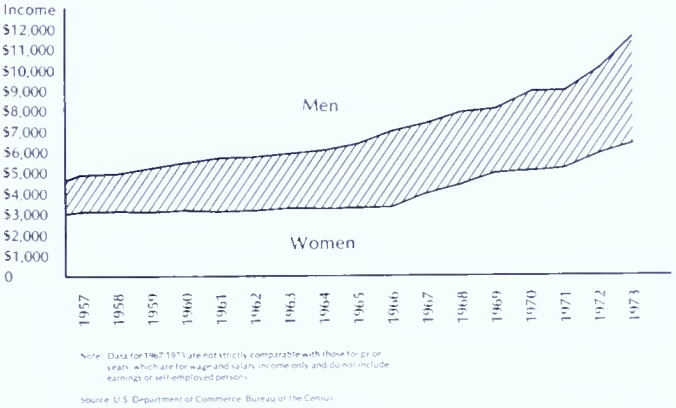
Today the worklife expectancy of the average woman worker is 25 years. The majority of women who leave the workforce to have children return. Younger women are having fewer children and taking less time out of the labor force. With a life expectancy of 75 years, women who devote themselves full time to homemaking and mothering for 15 or 20 years may work for an additional 20 years after their children are grown. Consequently, women are looking more and more to the world of work for personal satisfaction.

"Women's work" does not meet the needs of all women.

Women workers are concentrated in relatively few occupations, the so-called "women's jobs," which are among the lowest paid in our economy. Largely because of this concentration of women in low-paid jobs, women employed full time year round had a median income in 1974 of only $6,957 or 57 percent of the $12,152 received by men. Between 1956 and 1970 women's earnings as compared with men's actually decreased from 63 percent to 59 percent. Thus, the gap between men's and women's earnings is widening.

The earnings gap between women and men continues to widen

Median earnings of full-time year-round workers, 14 years of age and over, by sex: 1957-1973



Note: Data for 1967-1973 are not strictly comparable with those for prior years, which are for wage and salary income only and do not include earnings of self-employed persons.

Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census

Not only are women's jobs low-paid, they also offer very limited advancement opportunities, little if any training, less desirable fringe benefits, and top pay that is not much higher than entry-level rates. For the ever-increasing number of women with full responsibility for themselves and their families, traditional women's jobs provide inadequate compensation.

The non-professional occupations traditionally open to women also offer limited opportunities for personal satisfaction. Typically, women's work requires low skill levels, is more routine and repetitive, offers little challenge, and allows for little initiative and independence. And the choices for women have been severely restricted (40 percent of all women workers are in 10 occupations!), scarcely providing for individual differences and preferences.

Women's jobs offer neither the pay nor the work satisfaction many women today require. To satisfy their economic and personal needs women are acquiring skills and experience needed for jobs that have traditionally been considered "men's work."

These women seek opportunities in nontraditional jobs.

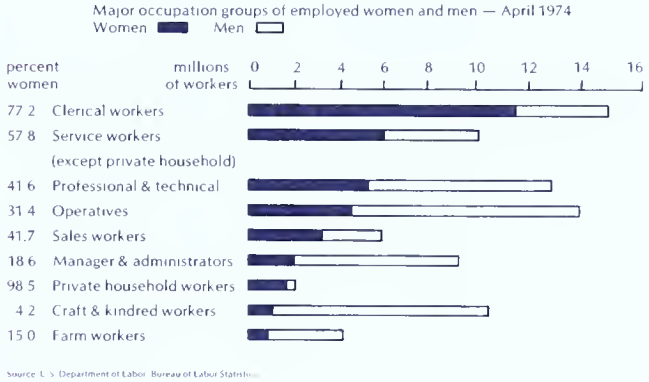
Aware that "men's jobs" pay more, women in increasing numbers are turning to these occupations. For women with a high school education the best opportunities for well-paid satisfying work are to be found in the skilled trades. The entry-level pay is considerably higher than it is in the traditionally female occupations of clerical work, retail sales, and food and service occupations such as waitress or hospital aide. On the job training is common in the trades and crafts. Pay increases are usually commensurate with increasing skill and seniority, with top wage rates much higher than the top pay in women's jobs. Frequently the fringe benefits are better, too.

Moreover, the skilled trades present opportunities for satisfaction not usually available in traditional women's office, store, or factory work. The work itself, using high levels of skill and often resulting in a finished product, can bring a sense of achievement. Skilled workers may have greater independence and mobility in their jobs. Many skilled occupations involve outdoor work, which appeals to some women. The chance to work with their hands and to be more physically active, characteristic of all the skilled trades, is attractive to some women.

Until recently many women who had an interest in "men's work" concealed it for fear of being thought unfeminine. Now, with social support for breaking out of the stereotyped image, more women are able to acknowledge their interests and seek work that is personally satisfying.

Women hold only 4 percent of the skilled blue-collar jobs.

Employment in different occupation groups varies by sex



Source: U. S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics

In 1960 only 277,000 women were employed in skilled trades. This is changing. By 1970 there were 495,000, an 80 percent increase, and in 1973 the number had grown to 561,000. In addition, women's enrollment in vocational, technical, and industrial training has dramatically increased during the past few years.

These women are showing that they are willing and able to accommodate their lives to nontraditional blue-collar trades. They are shattering misconceptions about women's strength, productivity, and abilities.

Women still face discrimination in nontraditional jobs.

It is a great mistake to think that because some women now have nontraditional jobs any woman who wants to can get one. Qualified women are still being rejected by employment managers. Interested women are still being discouraged from applying for training and apprenticeship programs. Those who are hired often face unfair demands by prejudiced supervisors and harassment by hostile workers.

Until 1964 women who encountered discrimination had no recourse. Now, however, the following state and federal laws guarantee women's rights to equal employment opportunity, including equal pay, equal fringe benefits, and equal treatment in hiring, promotion, training, seniority, and other conditions of work:

- U.S. Civil Rights Act of 1964, Title VII: Equal Employment Opportunity, Administered by the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, with a regional office in Philadelphia, PA;
- Pennsylvania Human Relations Act, administered by Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission, with regional offices in Philadelphia, Harrisburg, and Pittsburgh;

- Equal Pay Act of the Fair Labor Standards Act, administered by the Wage and Hour Division of the U.S. Department of Labor, with offices in Philadelphia, Harrisburg and Pittsburgh.

In addition, federal contractors are required by Presidential Executive Order to take affirmative action to ensure non-discrimination.

Affirmative action, based on the recognition that discrimination involves deeply embedded attitudes and institutionalized practices, has come to mean comprehensive strategies designed to identify and remove barriers to equal employment opportunity. Required of federal contractors, affirmative action may be demanded of other employers under Title VII after investigation reveals a pattern of discrimination. Federal courts have also ordered affirmative action plans to remedy grievances and to offset the continuing effects of past discriminatory practices.

Affirmative action works.

Where employers have implemented affirmative action, major changes have occurred. Many of these changes, employers and unions concede, are for the good. At the Port Authority of Allegheny County, for example, increasing the pool of bus driver applicants by including women has enabled the Authority to be more selective in hiring, resulting in better employees. Some members of the United States Steelworkers feel that the consent decree which commits the steel industry, including the unions, to affirmative action, is a boon to all workers because it provides opportunities for lateral mobility within the plant without loss of seniority or pay rate. Needless to say, however, forced compliance and affirmative action have been extremely costly — not only in back pay and the expenses of implementing the plan, but in the time and money spent on conciliation and litigation proceedings.

Unless employers voluntarily take steps to end discrimination, it is unlikely that the legal efforts will diminish. Having seen the effectiveness of legal action, women increasingly are using the laws and the enforcement agencies, filing grievances and bringing suits charging sex discrimination. By lobbying, campaigning, running for office, and other political tactics, women are keeping the pressure on government for rigorous enforcement of equal rights laws.

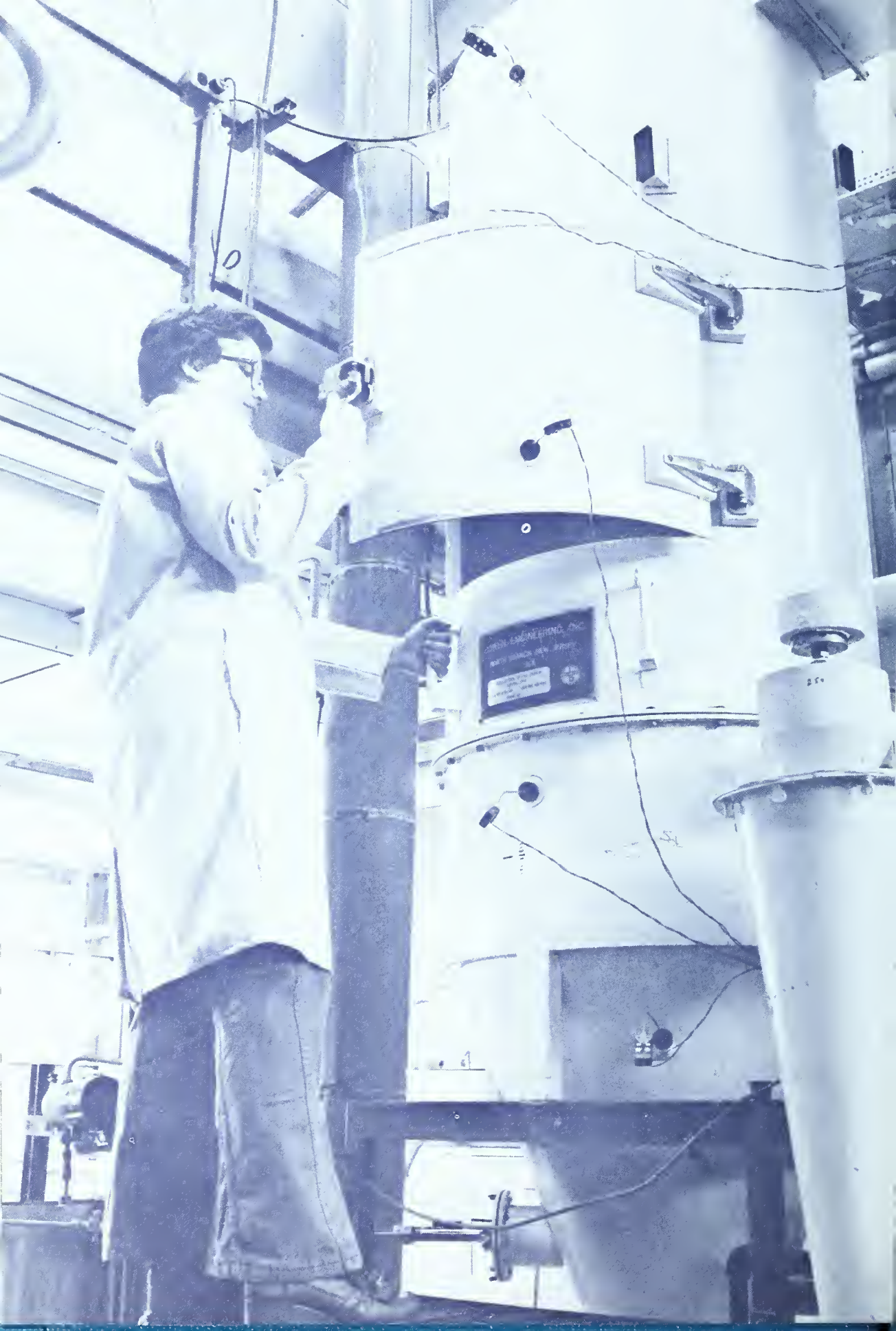
Motivated by economic necessity, encouraged by changes in attitudes about women's role, informed about their legal rights, women can be expected to become more, not less, interested in skilled blue-collar jobs. But until it is no harder for a woman to get and keep any blue-collar job than it is for an equally qualified man, we cannot say employment discrimination is ended.

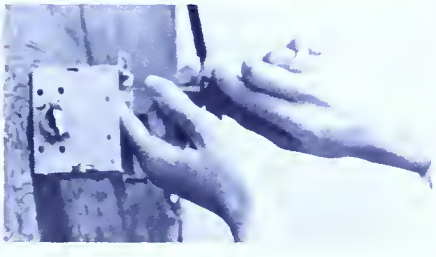
More women want nontraditional blue-collar jobs now.

Although women are only a small percentage of skilled blue-collar workers now, their numbers are growing rapidly. The rate of increase of women in skilled trades is twice that for women in all occupations. Not limited to one or two occupations, women's employment is increasing in almost all the skilled trades - in construction, mechanic and repair, and supervisory positions. From 1960 to 1970, women carpenters increased by 8,000. Significant increases also occurred among electricians, plumbers, auto mechanics, painters, tool and die makers, and compositors and typesetters.

Other blue-collar occupations in which women have made significant gains include bus driving, up from 12 to 37 percent, and protective services, in which women guards tripled in number and women police almost doubled.

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, forty percent of the 415 occupations recognized as apprenticeable had female apprentices in 1976, double the number in the previous year.





Women show they have the aptitudes and strength.

That many women have the aptitudes to perform jobs dominated by men has been demonstrated by tests and by on-the-job experience. Since 1922 the Human Engineering Laboratory of the Johnson O'Connor Research Foundation has conducted extensive studies which indicate no significant sex differences in the majority of aptitude and knowledge areas studied. The General Aptitude Test Battery (GATB), used by the U.S. Employment Service over a period of years, assesses seven areas which are important to success in the skilled trades. The results show no sex differences in two areas; women excel in four, and men in one. During World War II, women demonstrated on the job that they had the aptitudes to handle the work. Trainers and supervisors claim that women acquire skills as readily as men.

As for the physical strength requirement, no data exist on the ability of the average man or woman to meet the demands of various occupations. What has been shown, however, is that employers and male workers frequently estimate physical requirements as higher than the actual demands of the job. In many skilled jobs the physical requirements are no greater than for housework, and in many instances machinery has reduced the need for strength. Furthermore, women in physically demanding jobs report that their strength rapidly increases.

Employers see that women can do the job.

As the number of women working in nontraditional blue-collar jobs increases, and as more women get vocational and technical training, employers are realizing that women constitute a valuable labor pool for skilled blue-collar work. Employers and unions are finding that women **do** want to work in these occupations, that they are capable of handling the jobs, and that they are eager for an opportunity to succeed. In fact, wherever women are allowed to work, they show they can do it.

So, why not a woman?

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Pennsylvania Commission for Women

On February 27, 1975, Governor Milton J. Shapp created the Commission for Women to serve as an advocate for Pennsylvania's 6.3 million women. The Commission's job is to make sure that women have equal opportunity to take part in all areas of activity and work in the Commonwealth. To that end, the Commission is responsible for planning and carrying out programs which assure equal rights for Pennsylvania women.

The Commission has a mandate to oversee the implementation of the state Equal Rights Amendment, and is currently reviewing state laws to assure compliance with E.R.A. In addition, it serves as a clearinghouse for complaints and information, publishes resource guides on women's issues, monitors legislation related to women's concerns, and initiates special projects and tasks to further women's interests.

One of its major projects has been the development of a program to reduce barriers to women's employment in skilled trades and related blue-collar jobs. This was funded by a grant from the Governor's Office under the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA). This resource book and an accompanying film which depicts women working in non-traditional jobs are the result of this project.

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